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SUBJECT: FOOD DISTRIBUTION IN SAHRAWI REFUGEE CAMPS: A
DIRE SITUATION?

REF: ALGIERS 2025

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) During a November 16-17 trip to the Tindouf region of Algeria, visiting NEA/MAG Algeria desk officer and poloff met with Sahrawi Red Crescent Society (SRCS) President Yahia Bohubaini and with UN World Food Program (WFP) representative Keddi Abdellah to discuss the status of food distribution in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Both Bohubaini and Abdellah painted a grim picture and said that reserve food stocks for the refugees were depleted.

¶2. (C) Bohubaini led a tour of the virtually empty SRCS food distribution center serving the camps around Tindouf. He said the United Nations provided lentils, sugar, flour and cooking oil to the refugees but cautioned that the quantities supplied were at best sufficient for meeting "survival needs." He asserted that many refugees were anemic and malnourished. (In a separate meeting, Tindouf UNICEF director Leila Bent-Mustapha echoed this concern as it applied to children.)

¶3. (C) Bohubaini also shared with us the Polisario's version of how this situation came to pass. According to Bohubaini, WFP and UNHCR made the "unilateral" decision in August 2005 to reduce its estimate of refugees in need of feeding from 158,000 to 90,000, the latter figure representing the "most vulnerable." The Polisario rejected this decision, and Bohubaini continued to issue 158,000 rations, even though WFP scaled back its aid. The rest of the rations came from the normal reserve stock in the SRCS distribution center. Starting in March 2006, however, WFP increased its aid to 125,000 rations per day, and Bohubaini scaled back the SRCS's issuance of rations to match that number. In August, the WFP decided to reduce its reserve stock to zero, planning to replenish the stock fully at the initiation of a new UNHCR/WFP food-supply program in January 2007.

¶4. (C) WFP representative Abdellah's assessment of the status of food distribution paralleled Bohubaini's, though there were some significant differences. Abdellah believed that the SRCS continued to distribute food to all 158,000 refugees that it claimed resided around Tindouf, thereby exacerbating the problem of low food reserves. Because of the lack of reserve stocks and sometimes tardy WFP deliveries, he said, the WFP office in Tindouf dedicated the emergency money in

its budget to purchases of foodstuffs on the local market. This was considerably more expensive and there were no quality assurances. He further remarked that the Algerian government refused to allow a census of the population in the camps unless it was organized as part of a broader plan to resolve the political status of the refugees. Abdellah noted that the SRCS also received direct bilateral assistance that was not under the control of WFP.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) It is clear that food distribution at Tindouf remains troubled by confusion, poor management and possibly fraud. The assessments by Bohubaini and Abdellah of the availability of food stocks for refugees were grim but not alarming, since neither suggested that starvation was a cause for concern. While both maintain there is no reserve stock of WFP-funded food in the SRCS distribution center, they acknowledge the irregular receipt of bilateral food aid, albeit of inconsistent quantity and nutritional value. Most striking is the confusion between SRCS and WFP about the type and quantity of food being distributed and the number of refugees receiving it.

¶6. (C) Our conversations with WFP in Algiers confirm that disagreement continues between WFP and UNHCR over the appropriate population figure to use in discussing renewal of the food-supply program for the Sahrawis. It appears clear that a process of registration of the refugee population at Tindouf is necessary to make the WFP program there both accountable and effective. We recommend renewing the call to register the inhabitants of the Tindouf camps to reduce waste and possible fraud in the distribution of WFP food aid.

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